TOPIC IN REVIEW

The search for a job: bringing focus to a daunting task

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One of the most important decisions in a professional career is selecting a job. Initially, there is often a dazzling array of possibilities, but they are distributed throughout the world or country, and each seems to offer a different set of advantages and disadvantages. As a result, many describe the task as overwhelming and frightening.

Physicians have a poor record of selecting satisfying and stable jobs. Fifty percent of graduating residents change jobs in 2 years and 80% change jobs in 5 years.[1] As mentors to both junior and senior physicians, we have been struck by most physicians' lack of preparation in planning a job search. We developed a framework to assist our colleagues in securing meaningful opportunities. Feedback from those participating in our workshops and seminars has been positive.

Summary points

- Fifty percent of graduating residents change jobs in 2 years and 80% change jobs in 5 years
- Few programs train residents to search effectively for a job
- This article offers a sequential program to help physicians generate and prioritize job goals, find mentoring, identify appropriate positions, interview, then negotiate effectively
- Organization and honest self-reflection are the keys to an effective search for a satisfying job

METHODS

Since 1991, one of us (H B) has offered a workshop on finding and negotiating a job for the internal medicine residents at Highland Hospital, Rochester, NY and, since 1998, to internal medicine residents at the University of Rochester. Based on feedback from participants and the author's experience as chief of medicine and program director, the workshop was continuously improved. Since 1993, it has been offered to 3rd-year family medicine residents at the University of Rochester. The workshop has also been offered as a workshop by both of us at 3 national meetings of the Society of General Internal Medicine.

The content of this article was influenced by feedback from those participating in these workshops and through research and mentoring at Johns Hopkins (L F).[2] We also draw on appropriate published works that address medical career development.

AN ORGANIZED APPROACH TO THE PLANNING PROCESS

Finding the appropriate position for each individual requires an organized approach to the search process. Although physicians' preferences vary widely, a successful decision-making process can be predictable and explicit.

The first step in finding a meaningful position is determining clear career goals and formulating a plan to search and negotiate for the position. For example, Fried and colleagues found that a successful negotiation for adequate protected time and research facilities was influential in eventual promotion.[2] To successfully negotiate, however, you must have a clearly prioritized sense of the key components of your desired job. For example, Beckman and Baig argue that for those seeking a practice noted for the caring extended to its patients, a nurturing work environment should be specifically sought.[3]

THE PLANNING PROCESS

Define your goals

The first and most important step is to define explicit career goals. Then, begin to imagine a position in which these goals could be embedded. Unfortunately, many graduating residents seek opportunities to please others or satisfy some idealized notion of what is "right." Worse is a situation in which a physician settles for a job that will never meet his or her career aspirations.

Surprisingly, many participants in our workshops are unable to clearly articulate goals. For an interviewer, one of the most frustrating and unimpressive answers to the question, "What are you looking for in a job?" is "I'm not sure. What do you need?"

Define the factors that influence your primary goals

What factors are influencing your goals? For example, if you, as a graduating resident, have a large loan burden, financial considerations may override other goals. Alternatively, physicians may need to be close to or far from family, desire a particular section of the country that supports a hobby or educational opportunity for other family members, or owe years of service to the Public Health Service or armed forces to repay assistance with financing for medical school. For an academic position, the choice of mentors or a critical mass of colleagues with similar research interests may be an overriding issue.

Prioritize goals and the factors influencing them

Once you have defined your goals and the factors influencing them, they should be prioritized. Conflicting issues, such as maximal hours of work and desired level of income must be directly confronted.[4] Armed with a clear sense of what counts most, you can begin to recruit colleagues to assist you in identifying suitable opportunities. Ordering these priorities and factors is a critical step in preparing for the negotiating process.

Find a mentor

At this point in the search, many applicants are enticed by headhunters and journal advertisements. A more effective strategy is to seek the advice of mentors, respected practitioners, and valued faculty members. Residency and fellowship directors and program faculty often spend considerable time creating professional networks. These physicians know which institutions are up and coming, which are likely to lose key people, and which might be seeking clinicians, clinician-educators, or researchers.

For those seeking practice opportunities, faculty members can suggest academic colleagues in other locations who can put candidates in touch with well-respected practice groups. Using these collegial networks is an efficient way to identify quality opportunities. By sharing plans with a mentor who can be recruited to call his or her contacts, you begin the search as a member of a community rather than as a stranger, unknown to those to whom you are applying. Trainees often defer these requests, using the excuse that their teachers are too busy or important to help. But we would strongly suggest that assisting junior partners in finding appropriate, satisfying work is a responsibility and benefit of serving as an educator.

Construct a letter of introduction and curriculum vitae

Armed with a clear statement of goals and a list of places or individuals suggested by your mentor, colleagues, journals, and possibly recruiters, you should construct a letter of introduction. This should present a clear picture of your goals, interests, special attributes, and employment requirements. Whenever possible, it is best to begin the letter with the name of the person who suggested you apply.

Trainees often ask how honest they should be when describing themselves to a prospective employer or partner. A rule of thumb is to clearly represent who you are so that both the applicant and the interviewer can determine whether the "mix" is appropriate. If you misrepresent your interests, you may waste the potential employer's time, or worse, find yourself trapped in an unsatisfying position. By introducing yourself openly and honestly, you will get a sense of how well your values and interest match those of your potential employer.

A curriculum vitae (CV) is attached to the letter of introduction. The CV should be carefully constructed to highlight the areas around which you hope to orient your career. For example, if you are looking for a clinician-educator position, you should emphasize your teaching activities. If you are interested in a practice position, add a section about procedural skills acquired during training and office-based experiences.

To assist graduating residents or fellows, program directors often keep sample CVs on file or create a template that contains organized lists of practices and educational and research activities in which trainees have been involved. Quality improvement projects, information sys-

Find a mentor

Sharon Watson is a chief resident in obstetrics-gynecology. Her husband is taking a fellowship in Portland, OR, and she wants to join an obstetrics-gynecology group in the area. She sought assistance because she was having difficulty finding an opportunity and was becoming discouraged. Everyone told her Portland is popular and there are no jobs available.

Watson knew her goals and understood the factors influencing her decision. She had prioritized carefully. At the workshop, she realized she had not sought sufficient mentoring. Because she was not seeking a faculty position, she did not think that faculty contacts where she trained could be helpful.

With encouragement, she spoke to several faculty members, each of whom had colleagues in Portland that they called. Their colleagues identified 2 excellent practices that were "considering" recruiting a new partner next year. She contacted the practices, saying that her faculty had recommended them. She interviewed and found 1 of the practices to be just right for her. They felt the same, and in September, she will begin working in a 4-person group.

tems training, videotape review programs, and experience serving on medical school/residency committees all demonstrate the acquisition of skills or knowledge that make you a more desirable candidate.

Assess your marketability

In preparing for interviews, you need to know the extent to which your services are in demand. You can discuss this with your mentors and colleagues. A clear sense of the market, and how you compare to others seeking the position, is critical to the negotiation process. Overestimating or underestimating your marketability can lead either to pricing yourself out of the market or being hired with insufficient resources to succeed.

Observe the culture of the prospective job

Before your interview, plan to spend some time observing the environment of the prospective job, including how patients, staff, faculty, and clinicians are treated and how the flow of people and information in the practice or office is managed. Picture yourself in the environment. Does it seem right for you? Talk with patients in the waiting room and with house officers, secretaries, or other personnel. When considering a practice, visit the hospital to which you would be admitting your patients and ask emergency department, ward team, and intensive care unit staff how the group you are considering is viewed. By closely examining the culture in which you might find yourself, you can get a better sense of whether it fits your needs. It also serves as a reality check for the information the recruiter or prospective employer offers.

Prepare for the interview

Prepare for interviews by finding out well in advance about the institution you will be visiting. Use networks to identify people with whom you can speak informally and confidentially. Find out about strengths and weaknesses of staff, their interests in practice, education, or research, and be prepared to speak about how these interests match up with your goals.

The interview

Be yourself

Be yourself during the interview. Tell the interviewer who you are and what position you are seeking. If they want someone else, it is better to know early on. If there are mutual interests, explore them openly. Be honest about what you can offer and what you will need to successfully deliver the services for which you will be responsible. Be ready to specify the resources needed to succeed at the job, and remember that success at work is tied to the resources initially made available.[2]

Identify what the interviewer wants

Ask what the interviewer is specifically seeking. By making your goals explicit while showing an interest in the interviewer's needs, you indicate a desire to be both assertive and collaborative.

Ask about the criteria used to judge performance and how these measures are tied to future advancement. Issues of salary and benefits are best left until after an employer has offered you the job. By demonstrating your interest, knowledge, and willingness to collaborate, your value and negotiating position is enhanced. At the conclusion of your visit, if you are interested in the position, write down

Assess your marketability

Mason Plaisson is finishing his masters in public health at a prestigious program. His wife is taking a fellowship in Denver, CO, and he is looking in the area for a position in geriatrics, his area of interest. He knows his goals and has spoken with a mentor, who identified several contacts in Denver.

His letter and CV were well organized and impressive. As a result, he was granted an interview for a position at a geriatrics facility well known as a supportive, nurturing institution.

Plaisson would rather have gone to Seattle and believed he was a desirable candidate. In the interview, he asked for significant resources for research and a salary that exceeded the community standard.

He was surprised when he heard by letter that the service chief had decided to hire someone else, a person Plaisson considered less qualified than himself. In a meeting with the organization's chief executive officer, the chief of the department was heard to say, "We almost got a hotshot from a prestigious program, but he priced himself out of the market. I was concerned he would be too demanding in the job, and I found someone who will probably be a better team player."

Issues Important To Me Organization	*Job Opportunities*		
Organization's mission and goals match my values and goals • My long-term goals (5 years)_____ • My short-term goals (1-3 years)_____			
Time allocation • % teaching • % clinical care • % research			
Organization's population • Patient population • Trainees • Content areas of faculty expertise			
Short-term job description: • Matches my goals Long-term: • Growth and development opportunities			
Culture of the institution • Are the leaders supportive of the careers of women and minority members?			
Geographic location			
Expectations for job promotion: • What is rewarded? • What accomplishments are needed for promotion?			
Resources to meet goals are present, including: • $ - Start-up funds, if needed or necessary short-/long-term support • Equipment (computer) • Support staff: - Secretary, clinical, research assistant, other Space: • Adequate • Location will facilitate work, collaboration?			
Colleagues: • Mentor • Critical mass of collaborators			
Time (hours)			
Salary - % hard $; how will the rest of it be earned?			
Benefits			
Parking			
Criteria for promotion?			

Developed by L Fried, Johns Hopkins Health Institutions.

Job negotiation and decision grid

your understanding of the institution's goals for the position, the areas that need clarification, and your thoughts about how your skills and interests match the needs of the position. Send these thoughts to the main interviewer.

Make a deal

If you and the interviewer decide to begin job negotiations, you should tie requests for resources to the employer's goals. Given limited resources, employers are

Develop a plan to accomplish goals

Sarah Salter is a faculty member in general internal medicine. She is becoming unhappy at work and feels she is stagnating because support for her research is lacking. At our workshop, she described being underappreciated. When asked how she asked for the resources needed to meet her research goals, she responded that it wouldn't be worth the time to put the proposal together.

Reflecting that we rarely receive something without asking for it, she was encouraged to make a proposal that describes her interests and clearly articulates how her research will benefit her division and department. In advance of the proposal, she submitted 2 small grants to get started.

In her meeting with her division head, she described her interests and made a compelling presentation of the benefits of the project for the division. Her boss's response was, "Thank God someone is showing some initiative around here. I've been waiting for someone to develop some research here." She received 30% protected time and assistance in identifying and writing some grants to get her research started. At the next national meeting, she was 50% funded and thrilled with her new career within a career.

more likely to spend these resources on your interests if such spending helps to address their goals as well. In the negotiation process, ask for the resources you believe are appropriate and will enhance the likelihood of your success.

Specific details about appropriate salaries and benefits can be obtained from organizations like the Association of Medical Colleges.[5-7] All too often, individuals are afraid of making reasonable requests. Employers rarely offer more than is requested. Applegate and Williams have provided an excellent review for those seeking an academic career.[8]

As negotiations continue, reevaluate your goals and priorities. Be clear about what your own bottom line is—that is, the responsibilities and resources that are essential to a fulfilling, successful position. Conversely, know what requests can be dropped as part of "good faith" negotiation. The figure provides a sample decision grid developed by one of us (L F). Explicitly comparing attributes of available positions can clarify the areas requiring further negotiation, as well as the job that best matches your goals.

Only accept a job you want

At the conclusion of the negotiations, accept only a job you want. If the job is not right for you, don't take it. Return to your goals, networking, CV, marketability assessment, and interviews. Taking a job that is a poor fit can be a disaster for both you and your employer. Instead, take a filler job and rework the process after identifying where you went wrong. A common error is miscalculating your marketability.

Get it in writing

If you reach a mutually acceptable arrangement, send to your prospective employer your impression of the job description as mutually outlined. You might begin such a letter with, "I would like to formalize my understanding of our agreed upon goals, responsibilities, and resources for my position as———." You should then expect a written job offer in reply. Make sure you and the employer agree on the details before making a final commitment. We recommend having an attorney review the letter of offer or contract.

CONCLUSIONS

By creating an organized, thoughtful approach to setting goals and by developing a plan to accomplish them that explicitly defines the resources required to succeed, you can improve your chances of finding personally meaningful work.

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